

the expected range of spring males at Dungeness; the bird apparently being in good health.

It would appear that this could be an example of traumatic albinism in view of the fact that the whole tail was still in growth. Apparently the cause of tail loss had additionally damaged the feather buds of the new growth. The bird was ringed: British Museum N 90234; and it will be interesting in the event of a subsequent capture to know if the tail reverts to normal plumage following the post-nuptial moult.

B. A first-winter bird trapped on 10th August, 1964 with a complete lack of all *black* pigment, resulting in a buff coloured individual, with bill, legs, feet and claws a pale flesh-pink. The eyes appeared the normal dark brown. Harrison (1963) termed this fawn or buff plumage "aneumelanic". In all respects of measurement and weight (15.5 gms. at 1945 hrs. GMT) the bird was within the range expected for the species and was apparently in good health. The bird was ringed: British Museum N 91300 and released, being seen briefly the following day but not subsequently.

C. An apparently normal first-winter bird trapped on 28th August, 1964 was found to have all its claws paler than normal and a total of four completely white. The bird was ringed: British Museum N 91828.

We are most grateful to Dr. P. F. Harrison and Mr. J. Houston for the two photographs.

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The nest and eggs of the Striped Crake, *Porzana marginalis* Hartlaub

by CHARLES R. S. PITMAN

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The nest of the Striped Crake is first mentioned by Andersson—*Ortygometra marginalis* (Hartl.), Olive-margined Crake—in *Birds of Damara Land* (1872), pp. 318-320.

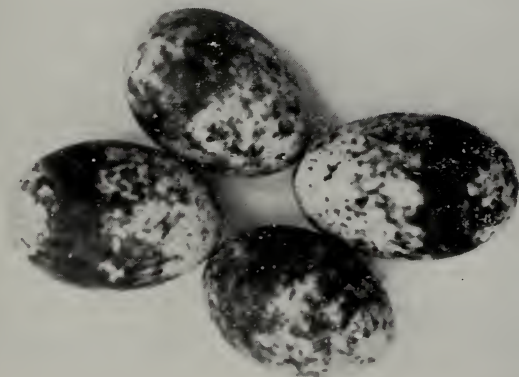
In February and March 1867, Andersson at Ondonga, Ovamboland, collected and observed specimens of this rare crake, as well as obtaining eggs—which he describes "of a yellowish ground-colour almost hidden near the thicker end by a broad zone of light brownish red".

Three females were collected, one each respectively on 6th and 23rd February and on 2nd March. Eggs, as described above, and said to be those of the Striped Crake were brought to him (and also a ♀) on 23rd February; their identity was confirmed by Andersson when, on 1st March, he found a nest containing four similar eggs, situated just on the edge of a marsh, in a dryish tuft of grass; the parent, though not secured was several times observed. The next day, 2nd March, another nest (the third) was brought by a native, with the bird which he had captured upon it, and four eggs. On 26th March, an abandoned nest was found with five eggs, far from the water; it had the surrounding grass tied above it, as in the nest of the Lesser Moorhen *Gallinula angulata* Sundevall. I have been unable to establish whether Andersson's eggs are still in existence.

Austin Roberts (*in litt.*) informed me that in the same locality—at Ondonga—in marshy ground, in May 1937, he saw a Striped Crake which he failed to procure and found its old nest in the marshy grass. As the bird several times flew into this patch he concluded it probably had young ones there.

In Roberts (Revised) (¹: 104) there are no further original breeding data from South Africa and there is no reference to this crake in Southern Rhodesia by Priest^{2 3}, nor yet by Belcher¹ for Nyasaland.

Reports received from various local correspondents from 1953 to 1964 indicate that the Striped Crake probably breeds regularly in Southern Rhodesia during January and February. B. V. Neuby Varty was the first to publish (⁵: 60) the record of a nest, at Marandellas—31st January 1953—which he describes as “a saucer-shaped pad of grass woven into standing grass, about three feet high, in a pool of water, in fact the nest was actually floating on two feet of water.” The nest was found when a dog caught the brooding ♀ parent, which was identified at the National Museum of Southern Rhodesia. The eggs measure 33 x 22, 31.5 x 23, 30 x 21.5 and 29.5 x 21.5 mm.; their incubation had commenced. The coloration is described as “very beautiful; the ground colour a pinky-cream with irregular blotches of various shades of rich reddish chocolate coalescing to form an irregular band of a deep dried blood colour which changes to a purplish chocolate at the large end. The underlying, irregular markings of shades of purple, mauve and slate vary considerably in size; there are also small spots.”



Photograph: B. V. Neuby Varty

c/4 of *Porzana marginalis*

During fifteen years Neuby Varty has found only three nests, in an area of a couple of hundred acres liable to seasonal inundation, where there is a tufty wire grass averaging about one foot in height. In it there are grassy pools a foot or so deep and from a couple of feet to ten feet in diameter; shortly after the termination of the rains these pools are dry. The Striped Crake has not been observed in the permanent swamps of four to

six feet high aquatic vegetation. The first nest was found too late to obtain eggs, the second is the one described and the third a nest which the birds abandoned. Neuby Varty has never come across more than a couple of birds at a time; he is of the opinion from what he has observed that the Striped Crake is inclined to build 'dummy' nests, for some nests are partially constructed and then left. He has not heard these birds utter any call; they appear to be silent. It is possible, with a dog, to flush these birds a second time: in the interests of the birds no attempt was made to flush a third time. They are found in the same sort of habitat as Böhms' Crake (or Fluff-tail) *Sarothrura böhmi* Reichenow, and both species may be found together. The Striped Crake prefers to keep very much to cover and despite its long legs creeps about like a rat; in its habits it resembles Baillon's Crake *Porzana pusilla obscura* Neumann which has been found nesting in the same locality—in a tuft of grass in about one foot of water. Neuby Varty has never seen the Striped Crake out in the open like the Cape Rail, *Rallus caerulescens* Gmelin and the African Crake, *Crex egregia* (Peters),

On 4th February 1952 (Southern Rhodesia Nest Record Card) one egg of the Striped Crake, measuring 28.8 x 22.2 mm., was found by C. T. Fisher on an interwoven platform of sedge leaves nine inches above the water in a clump of sedge in a rice (paddy) field.

On 13th March 1957, Carl Vernon, twelve miles outside Salisbury on the Gwebi Flats, found one egg measuring 30.5 x 21 mm. and two chicks covered in black down with creamy-white ceres, in a shallow bowl (or saucer) of thin grass blades in a grass tuft with the blades meeting above the nest, and sited in a small pan in ankle deep water with a dense stand of thin-bladed watergrass. The sitting bird was caught in the water, beside the nest, where it had taken refuge. The description of the egg is buff in ground colour with red brown and dark brown speckling at the narrow end, the markings becoming larger at the other end where they form a ring of smears; the underlying markings are slaty.

This habitat, similar to that described by Neuby Varty, consists of small pans *i.e.* depressions in open grassland flooded in the rains, seldom deep and with two to three feet high grass. Whenever these pans filled during 1958 and 1960 on the Gwebi Flats, *P. marginalis* attempted to breed, from the evidence of nests seen. c/5 *G. angulata* also was found by Vernon in a deeper part of the same pan as the *P. marginalis* nest in the previous year. During the eleven-year period 1954–1964, G. Hopkinson has found four *P. marginalis* nests within 2½ miles of the centre of Salisbury, but in a fairly quiet locality, respectively on 5th February 1961 (c/4), 18th February 1961 (c/4), 9th February 1963 (c/5) and 28th February 1964 (c/2, incomplete).

The c/4 he collected on 5th February 1961, in a marshy area on the outskirts of the town, were in an advanced state of incubation, the nest a shallow bowl placed a few inches above a temporary marsh in rank grassland. In this same locality eggs have been obtained of *Crex egregia*, *Porzana pusilla obscura*, *Sarothrura böhmi*, the Red-chested Crake (or Fluff-tail), *Sarothrura rufa* (Vieillot), and nearby the Black Crake, *Limnecorax flavirostra* (Swainson), which is more of a true marsh bird frequenting the edges of permanent water. These various crakes, he writes, appear in December, breed, and disappear in March.

Other species breeding in this area are the African Marsh Harrier, *Circus aeruginosus ranivorus* (Daud.), Blue Quail, *Excalfactoria adansoni* (Verreaux), and African Marsh-Owl, *Asio c. capensis* (Smith). Hopkinson has found remains of crakes in Marsh-Owl pellets. The four eggs which measure 31.1 x 21.0, 30.2 x 20.6 and 29.1 x 20.6 mm., and one which is damaged c.29.5 x 21.0 mm., are smooth with some gloss, and are now at the British Museum (Natural History). The ground colour varies from cream to warm buff or pale burnt umber, boldly mottled all over Indian red on underlying dark violet-grey; one egg has light burnt umber markings on underlying light grey. The rich markings somewhat resemble those on some eggs of the Red Grouse, *Lagopus scoticus* (Latham).

There are no data available for the c/4 taken on 18th February 1961; but the c/5 found on 9th February closely resembled the c/4 just described and measure 29 x 21, 29 x 22, 29 x 22, 29.5 x 20 and 28.5 x 21 mm.

On 28th February 1964, Hopkinson's pointer flushed a Striped Crake sitting on two perfectly fresh eggs, which were broken in the incident.

According to Hopkinson (*in litt.*) these crakes invariably place their nest in the centre of a tuft of the grass *Setaria* sp. either on the bank of a shallow drainage ditch—in two cases—or ten to twenty yards distant in the other two. When these tufts are burnt out each year, the re-growth forms a natural shallow depression in the middle of the tuft, thus providing an ideal nesting site for *P. marginalis*. These tufts grow all around and on the sides of the ditch, which usually contains a couple of inches of water during the rains (after any floods have abated). The *Setaria* tufts grow about three feet tall, with a diameter of nine to twelve inches, and the basal third of the tuft is very bushy. The cleverly concealed nest is immensely difficult to locate as the bird either sits very tight or runs through the grass for a few yards before flying—and only flies if put up by a dog. Neither Vernon, nor Hopkinson, have heard the Striped Crake utter any call, but Richard Brooke (writing from Salisbury) tells me that four of these crakes he saw together—believed to be a family party—on 30th May 1955 (an unusually late date) uttered a frequently repeated 'chup' or 'yup', sometimes taken up by all four birds together. They were on a pan by the Umniati river, about ten miles west of where the railway line crosses the river. They crept among the aquatic vegetation but were not so agile as Jaçanas and had to flutter over thin parts. In short flights the legs were trailed, but held horizontal if going far. In the same locality were Allen's Gallinule, *Porphyryla alleni* (Thomson), *Actophilornis africanus* and *Limnocorax flavirostra*. The dominant aquatic plants were water lilies, sedges (*Cyperus* spp.) and *Polygonum*.

C. W. Benson (*in litt.*) has very kindly provided me with a list of specimens of *P. marginalis* in museums in Southern Rhodesia and South Africa, from these two territories and from Northern Rhodesia. These records include two from Northern Rhodesia, respectively on 11th December (♂ near breeding) and 2nd January (♀); five from Southern Rhodesia (one a ♀ caught on 1st February when sitting on c/4, which I have already mentioned), four of which were collected respectively on 4th December (♀) 2nd February (breeding ♀), 10th February (♀) and 7th May (♂). A South African record is dated March and another (¹⁹: 66) is, presumably, May; examples in the Central African (formerly Congo) Museum,

at Tervuren, from Elisabethville, were collected respectively on 20th December (*vide* Chapin) and 3rd January, and one in January from Upemba, in S. E. Congo (additional Congo records are mentioned later). Benson also refers to two other Northern Rhodesia specimens—one from Abercorn (⁶: 596–97) in extreme north, killed against a house on 31st March and the other collected at Lundazi on 2nd September—an exceptional record as the date is most unusual. Maclean's (⁷: 87) sight record from South-West Africa dated 13th September, 1958 is another unusual date. He observed the bird at a distance of fifteen feet and noted that it bobbed its tail vigorously. At Fort Rosebery (west of Lake Bangweulu), North-Eastern Rhodesia Lynes (⁸: 37) on 12th December collected a ♀ "very soon to lay eggs."

In the wet grasslands of the Balovale region of Northern Rhodesia, during December 1943 and January 1944, Africans trapped for C. M. N. White (⁹: 316–17) 4 ♂♂ and 3 ♀♀ *P. marginalis*, all in breeding condition. A ♀ trapped on 31st December laid an egg in captivity, measuring 29 x 21 mm., which was smooth, very thin shelled, rather blunt and not markedly pyriform. It was pinkish, the whole surface very thickly covered with dark rufous markings, and at the large end a dark rufous zone with still darker spots and some lilac marks. c/2 (fresh) taken on 19th January measured 28.0 x 20 and 28.5 x 20 mm. were as just described, but slightly glossier and with the yellow and red markings more intense. On 22nd January, half-incubated c/4 measured 29–31 x 17–20 mm. and resembled c/2, but are more sparsely spotted at narrow end and with much stronger marked zone at large end. The ♂ parent was trapped on each of these two clutches. White records that the description of Andersson's eggs from Ovamboland agrees with his eggs.

White noticed that *P. marginalis* when walking is much more at home on the ground than the Black Crake, which is seemingly better suited to climbing among reeds.

Although eggs have not been recorded from Nyasaland, Benson obtained on 4th January (¹⁰: 208) a ♀ with eggs yolking in the ovary from a water-logged, short grass dambo, on 8th February a ♀ with well enlarged ovary yolking and on 10th February a ♂ with enlarged testes; and R. C. Long collected a ♀ on 27th December, in a flooded dambo, ten miles North of Edingeni. The Fort Rosebery example and those just mentioned from Nyasaland—excepting the ♀ of 4th January—are all at the British Museum (Natural History). Benson (¹¹: 450–51) further records from Nyasaland, 4 ♂♂ and 5 ♀♀ collected in the Fort Johnston region, all with gonads enlarged; three of these ♀♀ were collected respectively on 5th February, 7th February and 8th February.

In the Coryndon Museum at Nairobi there is an adult ♂ collected in the Tabora district of Tanganyika on 6th January which had greatly enlarged testes—evidently a breeding bird. Praed and Grant (²⁰: 290) refer to a breeding bird (undated) from south-western Tanganyika. Other specimens, from Kenya, in the same museum are, an adult ♀ in breeding condition picked up near Nairobi on 17th May after striking a lighted window at night; an adult ♀, in full breeding condition with enlarged oviduct which was found in a hospital ward in Nairobi on 29th May, having apparently flown in through a lighted window during the night and

this bird had certainly laid eggs prior to collection, and a juvenile ♀ in fresh plumage obtained at Ruiru on 10th September.

Jackson (¹²: 293) refers to two Kenya examples—one (not sexed) collected at Ribe, near Mombasa, in 1882 (no date) and the other (♂) shot in May in a marsh on the outskirts of Nairobi; this latter is in the Field Museum at Chicago. Jackson records “is either very rare or such a skulker” and “is not known to nest in Kenya”. In 1947, I was shown an unmistakable egg of *P. marginalis*—it was bluntly ovate, measured 29.7 x 19.7 mm. and was cream colour, boldly and profusely marked reddish brown, mainly on the upper two-thirds, on underlying shades of grey and violet—which was taken (newly laid) from a nest in an inundated marshy hollow at Kabete, a few miles outside Nairobi. The nest was of rushes and grasses bent over and down to form a platform for the eggs, and a bower of grass was bent over the nest. In the same small swampy bottom were two Lesser Moorhen *Gallinula angulata* nests containing respectively four and five eggs.

I have no records of any Uganda specimens.

From the Sudan¹³ there is no mention of the Striped Crake. Chapin (¹⁴: 9–10), referring to the Belgian Congo, records that on 29th May, at Rutshuru in the Kivu district, Eastern Congo, “a native brought me a male, freshly killed, from a grassy spot well away from water”, but he does not mention the state of the sex organs. According to Benson (*in litt.*), from information furnished by Schouteden, three specimens in the Central African Museum at Tervuren were collected at Buta in the Lower Uelle district, north-east Congo, respectively on 20th May, 27th June and 12th December; another four were obtained at Butembo in the high lands west of Lake Edward, on 25th February, 14th and 25th May and 7th June; other examples are from Yalokele in the Ikela district, between 0° and 2° South and 22° and 24° East, on 9th December, and Lutunguru (Kivu), 0° 29' South and 28° 47' East, on 22nd June. As none of these Tervuren specimens is sexed it is difficult to suggest a breeding season, but one would expect it to be after the rainy season. In West Africa, the Striped Crake is equally rare, or elusive, as elsewhere. Bates (¹⁵: 68) on 30th June 1925, near Maidugari in Bornu, north-eastern Nigeria, obtained a ♀—caught by villagers—which from the state of the ovaries was near its breeding time. According to Bannerman (¹⁶: 17–19) in West Africa one example has been obtained at Bipinde (Cameroon) and two in Gabon. Further, according to Bannerman (¹⁷: 152–53) “it is evidently a resident species with, quite possibly, strong migratory tendencies”. In view of my own East African experience over a period of more than thirty years I am inclined to challenge the assumption of possible “strong migratory tendencies.” For, until we know a great deal more about the habits and habitat of this elusive species, I am of the opinion that the operative word in Bannerman’s comment is “resident”, and that during the rains and flood season there is a dispersal of the Striped Crake from its normal (swampy?) haunts in order to breed and that long distance migratory movements are unlikely.

Bannerman (¹⁷: 152) quotes Serle’s description of c/5 *P. marginalis* taken at Kwarre, Northern Nigeria, on 5th August.

“The eggs are singularly handsome and quite unlike those of the other

Rails. The markings bear a resemblance to a heavily marked Kestrels' egg. They are ovate, smooth-shelled, and show a fair degree of gloss. They are richly and thickly marked so that the light buff ground is scarcely visible. The shell is blotched, spotted, and speckled with rich red-brown. At the broad end the red-brown markings are confluent and together with the subjacent markings form a solid cap or wreath which may cover a third of the shell area. The pale ashy undermarkings take the form chiefly of blotches and suffusions. They are well distributed. The eggs measure 28.7 x 21.3, 29.7 x 21.9, 29.9 x 21.7, 29.2 x 21.6, and 28.8 x 21.8 mm.

The brooding bird, the ♂, was trapped on the nest, which was on a dry bank (about two feet wide) separating two flooded fields of rice. The bank was about one foot above the water level and the nest, concealed in coarse herbage, was a dry grass-lined, shallow, circular depression, about 82 cm. diameter." In view of some previous remarks it is of interest to note that "*Porphyryla alleni*, *Gallinula angulata* and *Actophilornis africanus* were breeding within a radius of one or two hundred yards and probably shared its terrain." In Ghana (¹⁸: 175), on 23rd June 1956, a ♂ Striped Crake and a ♀ with an egg in the oviduct were collected near Bigada, at the mouth of the Volta River; the stomachs contained insects. The country is marshy savannah, with small scattered thickets into which the crakes retreated when flushed. These two specimens are at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington.

The known breeding seasons of *P. marginalis* are:—

REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA, no evidence of breeding.

SOUTH-WEST AFRICA (DAMARALAND), February and March (to May?)

SOUTHERN RHODESIA, NORTHERN RHODESIA and NYASALAND, January and February; also, probably south-east CONGO.

TANGANYIKA (TABORA), January.

KENYA (NAIROBI), May and June.

NORTHERN NIGERIA, July and August.

GHANA, June and July.

Twenty-four eggs average 29.6 x 21.2 mm., with a measurement range 28.7–33.0 x 19.7–23.0 mm. The smallest egg is from Kenya, 29.7 x 19.7 mm. Five Nigerian eggs average approximately 29.3 x 21.7 mm. and are not so long as fifteen eggs from Southern Rhodesia which average 29.9 x 21.36 mm. Additionally, White (⁹: 316) records c/4 from Northern Rhodesia with a range 29–31 x 17–20 mm.; 17 mm. represents an abnormally narrow egg.

CONCLUSIONS

According to Roberts Revised (1957) "Inhabits short, damp grasslands", but this seems to refer to what is known of this crake during the breeding season, for little has been recorded as to where it is likely to be found at other times of the year. That it is a skulker and elusive is indicated in the observations of Jackson, Neuby Varty and Hopkinson and ordinarily it would be exceptional even to glimpse it at breeding time.

In the knee-high grasslands of the Equatorial region of Kenya and Uganda I frequently flushed rails (spp. indet.) when walking through the wet grass—they were never flushed a second time no matter how thorough the search. I did not regard these birds as migrants, but suspected that they had dispersed temporarily from a swamp habitat—in the localities to which I refer areas of marsh, large and small, were never far distant—because adverse conditions had forced them out or possibly because of the attraction of good feeding in the grasslands during the rains. But this is surmise. Benson believes that an example collected at Lundazi, Northern Rhodesia on 2nd September and a sight record from South-West Africa dated 13th September, constitute abnormal occurrences of a species which should be absent from these territories, but I incline to the theory that in each case it is a stray from a not so remote swamp region. The bird's long legs seem to suggest a swamp habitat. What is indisputable is the fact that the Striped Crake does indulge in movements—either local or otherwise—during the hours of darkness when it flies at no great height and is evidently attracted by lights which brings it into towns and houses—other species of African rails are known to do likewise. Investigation of crop and stomach contents could indicate from where it obtains its food; it may be that it is nocturnal and feeds by night. It is possible that the widely distributed *Porzana marginalis* is not a rarity, but is seldom observed on account of its skulking habits and habitat; where it is to be found outside the breeding season has yet to be discovered.

I am greatly indebted to C. W. Benson, Richard Brooke, G. W. Hopkinson, B. V. Neuby Varty, the late Austin Roberts, Carl Vernon and John G. Williams for the much appreciated information they have variously sent me about the nests, eggs, distribution and museum specimens of the Striped Crake; and to Neuby Varty especially for the photograph of four eggs.

Benson, Brooke, Hopkinson and Vernon have all seen this paper; their useful comments and advice are much appreciated.

Benson (19: 56), in "support for the suggestion that *P. marginalis* is a long distance migrant" from the north to breed in southern Africa, refers to a ♂ specimen in the American Museum of Natural History which was collected on one of the Aldabra Islands, in the Indian Ocean, on 10th December 1904, "presumably blown completely off course on southward migration." This may be so, but is inconclusive in the absence of further evidence, and it is possible that under the peculiarly adverse weather conditions which are liable to occur in eastern Africa a bird of weak flight, such as a rail, can be driven hundreds of miles off its course when on a local movement. In East Africa I have known cases of species with relatively strong powers of flight driven some 300 miles off course in an exceptionally violent storm.

The American Purple Gallinule, *Porphyryla martinica* Linn. is of regular occurrence on Tristan Da Cunha, in the South Atlantic Ocean and Elliott (21: 579-80) records "When the migration route of a weak-flying species (which is particularly dependent on drifting down-wind) lies in an area subject to cyclonic disturbance, it is frequently thrown right off its course."

Some other instances of how far "off course", to the east, this gallinule may be thrown include three recent occurrences (29th April 1962, 30th

April 1963 and 19th May 1963) from the vicinity of or at sea (60 miles out) off Capetown (²²: 249–51); three examples presumed to be this species caught on St. Helena in 1961 (1) and 1962 (2), communicated by A. Loveridge (should these gallinules have originated from the African mainland, the sea passage would still be exceptional); and one recorded from the Scilly Isles by Nisbet (²³: 145–57).

SUMMARY

The available breeding records, published and others, of *Porzana marginalis* are enumerated and discussed.

Breeding seasons are recorded for various territories in Southern and Eastern Africa, Ghana and Northern Nigeria.

The Striped Crake nests variously outside the main swamps and marshes and in grasslands subject to flooding.

It will nest in fairly close association with other rails and the smaller aquatic species.

Both sexes take part in incubation.

The nest, which has a bower, and the handsome eggs, are described.

There is a reference to black downy chicks.

Conclusive evidence is offered of its skulking, elusive habits.

Conclusions and conjecture concerning this crake's habitat and movements are recorded.

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